

**By John Russo**  
**Let's Play Hockey Columnist**

Each year (for 25 years), I have had a Guest Writer for the "Coaches Corner" – to provide a new and fresh view from an outstanding young coach.

A Wayzata native, Judd Stevens starred at Wayzata High School where he earned All-Conference, All-Metro, and All-State honors and was a Mr. Hockey finalist in his (2001) senior year. He went on to be part of two national championships for the University of Minnesota, and was captain in 2004-05. He was Academic All-Big Ten and Academic All-WCHA in 2003-20, then went on to play pro hockey in Sweden. Upon returning to Minnesota, Judd started his coaching career with the Wayzata Bantam A's, including a state championship in 2009. He now is a coach in the Upper Midwest High School Elite League and earns his keep with Triple Tree Investment Bank.

**Seven Characteristics of Elite Defensemen**

**By Judd Stevens**

Over the past 10 years, the state of Minnesota has become a hotbed for developing NHL-caliber defensemen. With NHL rosters touting Minnesota natives such as Paul Martin, Jordan Leopold, Keith Ballard, Alex Goligoski, Ryan McDonagh, Erik Johnson, Jake Gardiner, Nick Leddy, Mike Lundin and Matt Niskanen (and others), this trend doesn't seem to be slowing down.

The consistent high level of play of these standout defensemen begs the question: What makes these defensemen so special? In my time studying elite defensemen, beyond strength, speed, hands and other physical attributes, there are seven intangible characteristics that all elite defensemen possess:

1. **Poise:** Defensemen are the quarterback of the team and like every elite quarterback, poise or calmness during the most pressure-packed, critical situations is common among the elite defensemen. Adverse situations are best overcome through this calm demeanor. Poise is contagious and can calm down an entire team.
2. **Vision:** Being the quarterback, the ability to see the play and identify even the smallest of seams to an open teammate is a differentiator for all elite defensemen. This vision comes with having your head up at all times. Most defensemen struggle to keep their head up while handling the puck, but not the true playmakers.
3. **Competitive edge:** As players move up through youth hockey, it becomes more important to have a certain edge which comes from extreme competitiveness. Great defensemen have a deep burning passion for the game which pushes them to do whatever it takes to help their team win. This includes all the little things that don't show up in the box score, such as blocking a shot or taking a hit to make a play.

4. Awareness: A common phrase for elite defensemen is having a "sixth sense." This innate ability to recognize where other players are on the ice is simply priceless. This is accompanied by proper positioning and allows elite defensemen to avoid the costly breakdowns or gaps in coverage. Having awareness of not only the other team but also one's own team helps elite defensemen cover the mistakes of teammates.
5. Minute-eater: Have you ever heard a defenseman described as a "minute-eater?" This is extremely common of the elite defensemen and not so much because the coach puts them out on the ice for often half or more of the game, but because elite defensemen know how to conserve energy unlike others. This comes by picking one's spots carefully. For example, jumping into the offense when there is a real scoring chance versus trying to make something out of nothing. Elite defensemen can pace themselves while being highly effective for an entire game.
6. Anticipation: Elite defensemen are always two steps ahead of the play. They are thinking beyond where the puck is now, but more focused on where it's going to be. Having the ability to feel a play begin to develop and prepare and position oneself for it is nearly impossible to teach, but an intangible trait that the elite defenseman develop over many repetitions and through great instincts.
7. Intelligence: Brains or brawn? If you go back to the list of Minnesota born NHL defensemen as listed above, yes there are some physical specimens, but it is not as though they are all 6-4 and 225 pounds – they are all great thinkers of the game. Good players can get by on their physical skills, but hockey intelligence is what separates the elite players. Some of the most effective defensemen are smaller during their youth hockey days, learn how to play the game with their brain, and then hit their growth spurt to become elite.

Booming slap shots, swift skating and a big strong frame were not mentioned. Why? While these are certainly important skills for all hockey players, I would argue that those are more gating factors for each level than differentiators.

The higher on the pyramid a player goes, the less skill differentiation there is across a team or level. For example, the best PeeWee players are usually the biggest, strongest and fastest players that get by on their physical tools. By high school, the gap is closed significantly with less skill differential from top to bottom. The elite players are separated by their intangibles.

Can these intangibles be taught? While you cannot send a kid to the rink or garage to work on poise or awareness like you can physical tools, there are certain hockey skills that can help kids develop these intangibles. Puckhandling is one of the most important skills that allow kids to play the game with their head up and develop poise, awareness and vision. I am often surprised by the disproportionate time kids are instructed to work on their slap shot versus puckhandling skills. From the list of defensemen above, more of them have smooth hands than a booming slap shot.

Intangibles are largely developed by repetition. The more a kid is exposed to a high pressure situation, the more they learn to excel under those same circumstances. Much of the list of traits had to do with an awareness to one's surroundings on the hockey rink. While coaches can remind kids to look for opposing players and be aware on the ice, I believe this is a trait that kids must learn over the years by recognizing themselves in similar situations, learning from mistakes (and successes), and over time making the right play becomes instinctive.

Another source to increase one's intangibles comes from playing other sports. As we all know, Minnesota hockey players are increasingly becoming one sport athletes. I won't argue that there comes a point in a player's development when specialization can make sense. However, until high school playing multiple sports is a great way for kids' to develop intangibles because they learn to be athletes, not just hockey players.

*John Russo, Ph.D., is founder and director of the Upper Midwest High School Elite League. He was a captain at the University of Wisconsin, and his Coaches' Corner columns have appeared in LPH since 1986.*